

CRS Report for Congress

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Women's Electoral Participation and Representation in Elective Office

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Summary

Women won the right to vote in 1920, when the 19th Amendment to the Constitution went into effect. Until recent decades, men were the majority of voters in national elections and greatly outnumbered women as elected officials. In every national election since 1964, however, the majority of voters have been women; and, since 1980, the number of women in federal and state elective office has virtually doubled. This report will be updated periodically to include new information on voting and representation.

Women's Suffrage

In colonial America, a limited group of women voted depending on local custom and provided they met the property-holding restrictions that determined eligibility. Women who met the freehold qualification because they owned or inherited land voted in some places when many men were excluded by the property restriction. In the years following the American Revolution, while property restrictions were eased and the franchise expanded to include many previously ineligible men, women were gradually disenfranchised. As states formalized their laws and adopted constitutions for governing within the newly created nation, explicit suffrage qualifications that limited voting rights to men only were included.

Between 1807 and 1838, women were excluded entirely from participation in the electoral process.¹ Gradually, in the decades after 1838, states eased voting requirements for women in certain types of elections. For example, Kentucky extended voting rights in school board elections to widows in 1838, Kansas gave all women that right in 1859, and

¹ R. Darcy, Susan Welch, and Janet Clark, *Women, Elections, and Representation* (New York: Longman, 1987), p. 8.

Massachusetts followed in 1879.² A formal effort to secure the vote for women began with the organization of the suffrage movement at mid-century.

The movement for women's suffrage had its origins in the abolitionist movement. In 1848, following an anti-slavery convention in London in 1840, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized a women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, where Stanton successfully pressed for adoption of a statement supporting women's suffrage. The movement stalled after the Civil War, when the focus was centered on a series of constitutional amendments concerning freed slaves. While these Reconstruction amendments addressed matters of rights and citizenship, women's rights were not included. Under the 14th Amendment, only "male" voting rights were guaranteed, which further complicated the struggle to secure the vote for women. The movement splintered as alliances were formed and abandoned with the parties and assorted political movements in an effort gain leverage for the cause. In the decades before and after 1900, progress toward the goal of universal suffrage was achieved slowly on a state-by-state basis.

The number of states in which women could vote, at least at the local level, increased gradually in the years prior to 1920, when the 19th Amendment was ratified to prohibit states from denying women the right to vote.³ In Western states and territories, women often voted in all elections before universal suffrage was attained because of the unique circumstances that characterized social relations on the frontier and the strong influence of the Progressive movement. By 1918, women had full voting rights in 15 states, only two of which (New York and Michigan) lay east of the Mississippi River.⁴ Another 11 states adopted universal suffrage in the following year, bringing the total number to 26 on the eve of ratification of the 19th Amendment. The approval of 36 states was needed for ratification of the amendment, which was completed on January 16, 1919; the amendment took effect one year after the date of ratification.

Voter Turnout

Voter ranks swelled with the addition of women after ratification of the 19th Amendment, but relatively few women went to the polls in elections after 1920. For a variety of reasons, turnout rates for women would not rival men's rates for another 60 years. Support for the suffrage movement had not been universal among women and many had neither political commitment nor any practical experience with going to the polls on election day. Social constraints on women's behavior remained strong in spite of the franchise victory. Furthermore, most Southern black women were prevented from voting altogether, through the use of poll taxes, literacy tests, and intimidation, until the Voting

² Ibid, pp. 7-9.

³ The 19th Amendment reads: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."

⁴ The following states extended full suffrage to women before the 19th Amendment was adopted: Wyoming (1890), Colorado (1893), Utah (1896), Idaho (1897), California (1911), Washington (1911), Arizona (1913), Kansas (1913), Oregon (1913), Montana (1915), Nevada (1915), New York (1917), Michigan (1918), Oklahoma (1918), South Dakota (1918).

Rights Act was passed in 1965. As social change occurred during the 20th century and women's roles in society were redefined, greater political involvement followed.

There is little voter turnout data from the period before surveys were introduced in the 1950s, except for irregularly available data from individual cities. Based on limited data, researchers suggest that women turned out to vote at much lower rates than men in the decades immediately following ratification of the 19th Amendment. In more recent years, survey data show that women's turnout rates in presidential elections from 1952 to 1960 were 9.4 to 11.9 percent lower than men's.⁵ Since 1980, women have voted at a slightly higher rate than men in every presidential election according to the Census Bureau, which began collecting voting information in 1964 (Table 1 below).

Table 1. Voter Turnout Rates in Presidential Elections, by Sex, 1964-1996

	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996
Women	67.0%	66.0%	62.0%	58.8%	59.4%	60.8%	58.3%	62.3%	55.5%
Men	71.9%	69.8%	64.1%	59.6%	59.1%	59.0%	56.4%	60.2%	52.8%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Voting and Registration: November 1996," [<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/voting/history/vot01.txt>], visited Dec. 5, 1997.

As for the number of women who go to the polls, women have been the majority of voters in every national election since 1964.⁶ For example, 56,108,000 women voted in the 1996 election as compared to 48,909,000 men, according to the Census Bureau. Since women constitute a growing share of voters, they have the potential to determine the outcome of elections at every level: national, state, and local. The Center for the American Woman and in Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University identified seven statewide races in 1994 and four in 1996 where most men and women voted for different candidates; in each case the candidate most women voted for was elected. (In comparison, most men, but not most women, voted for the winner in five races in 1994 and two in 1996.)⁷ The elections CAWP identified included U.S. Senate races in California, New Jersey, and Virginia in 1994, and Georgia, Louisiana, Montana, and South Dakota in 1996, as well as gubernatorial elections in Florida and Maryland in 1994.

Voting Patterns in National Elections

In recent decades, women have tended to support Democratic candidates at the national level, especially in U.S. House elections, while the overall tendency for men has been to vote for Republicans. Beginning in 1980, at least 53% of women voted for a

⁵ M. Margaret Conway. *Political Participation in the United States* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1985), p. 27.

⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Hectic Lifestyles Make for Record-Low Election Turnout*, Press release, (Washington: 1998), August 17, 1998, p. 5.

⁷ Center for the American Woman and Politics, *CAWP News and Notes*, Winter 1994, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 9; and Spring 1997, vol. 11, no. 2, p. 3.

Democratic candidate in 10 successive elections for the House.⁸ In presidential elections since 1972, a majority of women supported the following candidates: Richard Nixon (1972), Jimmy Carter (1976), Ronald Reagan (1984), George Bush (1988), and Bill Clinton (1996). A plurality of women voters supported Ronald Reagan in 1980 and Bill Clinton in 1992 (see Table 2 below).

A majority of men voted for Democratic candidates in five and Republican candidates in five of the ten elections for the U.S. House since 1980.⁹ In presidential elections, a majority of male voters supported the Republican nominee in four elections since 1972 and supported the Democratic nominee once. A plurality of men voted for Bill Clinton in 1992 and for Robert Dole in 1996 (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Voting in Presidential Elections, 1980-1996

		Women	Men
1980	Reagan (R)	47%	55%
	Carter (D)	45%	36%
	Anderson (I)	7%	7%
1984	Reagan (R)	56%	62%
	Mondale (D)	44%	37%
1988	Bush (R)	50%	57%
	Dukakis (D)	49%	41%
1992	Clinton (D)	45%	41%
	Bush (R)	37%	38%
	Perot (I)	17%	21%
1996	Clinton (D)	54%	43%
	Dole (R)	38%	44%
	Perot (I)	7%	10%

Source: Marjorie Connelly, "Portrait of the Electorate," *The New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1996, p. 28.

Gender Gap

The term "gender gap" was first used in 1980 when public opinion polls showed a sizeable difference in the level of support Governor Reagan received from men and women. The gender gap refers to differences in men's and women's voting patterns, which is especially noticeable when the sexes diverge with respect to candidate choice. For example, a plurality of both men and women supported Bill Clinton in 1992, but women's support was stronger: 45 % voted for Clinton compared to 41% of men, a gender gap for Clinton of 4 points. Virtually the same percentages of men and women supported George

⁸ Marjorie Connelly, "Portrait of the Electorate," *The New York Times*, Nov. 9, 1998, p. 20.

⁹ Ibid.

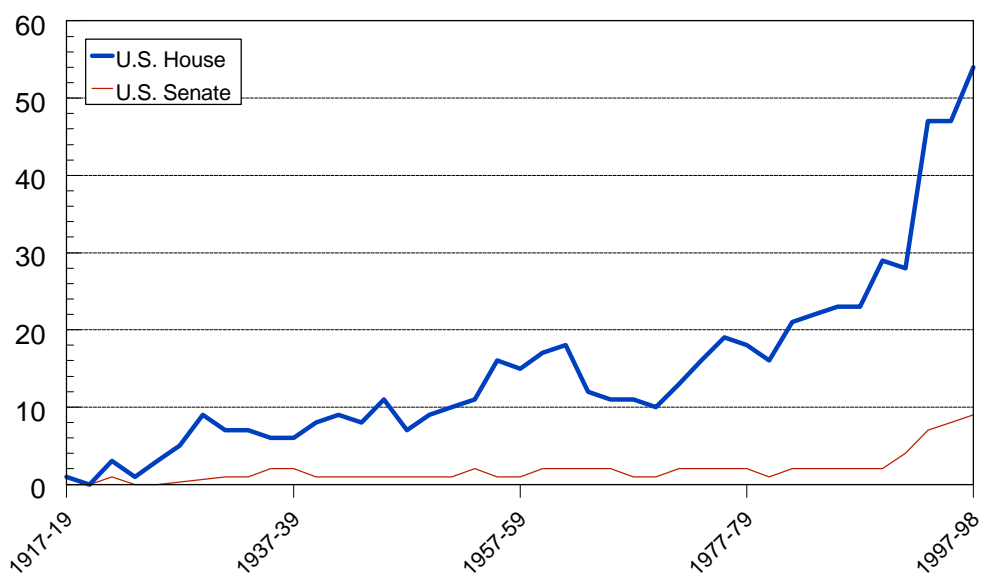
Bush in 1992: 38% of men and 37% of women voted for the incumbent President (a one-point gender gap).¹⁰ The gender gap can refer to the difference in voting patterns for the winning candidate, the losing candidate, the Democratic candidate, the Republican candidate, and so on. It should also be noted that such “gaps” can be observed with respect to other demographic categories as well, such as race or religious affiliation.

The largest gender gaps occurred in 1980 and 1996, when differences in men’s and women’s voting patterns were greatest. The gender gap for the winning candidate was eight points in 1980 (55% of men and 47% of women voted for Governor Ronald Reagan) and 11 points in 1996 (54% of women and 43% of men voted for President Clinton).

Women in Elective Office

For 20 years after Jeanette Rankin of Montana was elected to Congress in November 1916, the number of women in federal office following each election never exceeded nine. In the 1948 elections, 10 women were elected to Congress and, for the next several decades, the combined number of women serving in the House and Senate ranged between 10 and 20 until 1980, when 23 women were elected. In 1992, 55 women were elected to the 103rd Congress, nearly doubling the previous high of 33 women (in the 102nd Congress).

Women in Congress, 1917-1998



Source: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Women in the United States Congress*, by Mildred L. Amer, CRS Report 97-672 GOV (Washington: October 7, 1998). Figures for the 106th Congress are from the Center for Women in Politics, Rutgers University.

A record number of women serve in the 106th Congress, including the largest number of minority women ever elected. There are 67 women in the 106th Congress (12.5%), including 58 members of the House of Representatives and nine members of the Senate.

¹⁰ The data are based on exit polls, which are subject to possible bias or error. In some cases, the difference in candidates’ percentage vote fell within the margin of error for the poll.

According to the Center for the American Woman and Politics, the 106th Congress women include 14 African Americans (including Delegates from the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands), five Hispanic Americans, and one Asian American in the House. No minority women serve in the Senate in the 106th Congress.

Table 3. Women in Elective Office, 1980-1998

	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998
U.S. Congress	4%	4%	5%	5%	5%	6%	10%	10%	11%	13%
Statewide	11	11	14	14	14	18	22	26	25	28
State legis.	12	13	15	16	17	18	21	21	22	22

Source: Center for the American Woman in Politics, Rutgers University.

The percentage of seats women hold at the state and federal levels has virtually doubled since 1980. In Congress, women's share of total membership increased from 4% after the 1980 election to 12.5% after the 1998 election. The percentages of women who hold statewide or state legislative office have increased from just over 10% to 28% and 22%, respectively, since 1980. There are three women governors and 20 lieutenant governors in 1999. In Washington state, women make up over 40% of the membership of the state legislature, and, in six other states, women make up at least 30% of legislators.¹¹

Women Candidates for Elective Office

The number of women seeking office has also increased sharply since 1980. Whereas 57 women ran for Congress in 1980, 130 women ran for Congress in 1998. Even since 1990, the number of women running for Congress has increased 41%. More modest increases have occurred at the state level, where the number of women in state legislative races has increased by 25% since 1986.

Table 4. Women Candidates for the U.S. Congress, 1980-1998

	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998
Senate	5	3	10	6	2	8	11	9	9	9
House	52	55	65	64	59	69	106	112	120	121

Source: Center for the American Woman in Politics, Rutgers University.

¹¹ Women are at least 30% of state legislators in the following states: Nevada (36.5%), Arizona (35.6%), Colorado (33%), Kansas (32.7%), Vermont (31.1%), and New Hampshire (30.7%).